The Brown Lady of Raynham Hall – Re-examination of a Classic Ghost Photograph and a Possible Explanation

by

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A version of this article originally appeared on the *nthposition* website in January 2009. That website is no longer operating and its content is unavailable, so I have taken the opportunity to revise the article.

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January 2009/June 2017

Part One - A re-examination

I was prompted to re-examine the famous Brown Lady of Raynham Hall photograph by a talk Alan Murdie gave to the thirtieth international conference of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 2006,[1] which he expanded into an article for *Fortean Times*.[2] His analysis relies heavily on the file in the SPR archives in Cambridge University Library, particularly the report compiled by the SPR's Research Officer, C V C Herbert.[3] Unfortunately, Herbert's report is not a reliable source.

The Brown Lady has traditionally been identified as Dorothy Walpole, sister of Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole and the second wife of Charles, 2nd Viscount 'Turnip' Townshend. She died in 1729 and reports of her haunting of Raynham Hall date back to at least the 1830s. There are said to be other ghosts on the premises, including one of a cocker spaniel. During a stay in the house in 1836 the novelist Captain Marryat discharged his revolver at the Brown Lady, according to his daughter Florence.[4]

The story of the Brown Lady photograph's genesis is well known. On 19 September 1936, Indre Shira, of 'court photographers' Indre Shira Ltd, and Captain Hubert C Provand, his 'art director', visited Raynham Hall in Norfolk, seat of the Marquess Townshend, to take photographs of the property.[5] They commenced the task just after 8am, ranging round the house and grounds.[6] At about 4pm they were photographing one of the staircases, standing on the ground floor.

According to Shira, whose breathless account of what happened was published with the photograph in *Country Life* on 26 December 1936, Provand had taken a photograph while Shira manually triggered a flash gun. As Provand was preparing for another exposure with his head under the black cloth, Shira looked up the staircase and saw 'an ethereal, veiled form coming slowly down the stairs.'[7] He called out that there was something on the stairs and Provand uncapped the lens while Shira again triggered the flash. Afterwards Provand claimed not to have seen anything, to the extent that, as Shira told it, Provand wagered £5 there would be nothing untoward on the negative. Since its appearance in *Country Life*, and in the freshly relaunched *Life*

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[1] 'The Best Ghost Photograph Ever Taken? Re-assessing the "Brown Lady of Raynham Hall" Photograph', 30th International Conference, 2006, Liverpool Hope University. The Brown Lady photograph was also included in a lecture Murdie gave to the SPR in 2004, reported as 'Seeing Ghosts – Alan Murdie', by Matt Colborn, *Paranormal Review*, Issue 35, July 2005, p. 25.

[2] 'Photographing Phantoms', *Fortean Times*, No. 215, October 2006, pp. 50-53. The story was covered by Jonathan Thompson in the *Independent on Sunday* ('The spectre of the Brown lady will haunt us no more'), 8 October 2006, and by Lucy Metherell in the Cambridge student newspaper *Varsity* ('Ghost picture declared a fake: Barrister uncovers new evidence, but UL [University Library – a reference to the SPR file]'s Brown Lady "still a mystery"'), 13 October 2006.

[3] File SPR/Research/Psychic Photography 2/14 contains all the material assembled by the SPR on Raynham Hall and the Brown Lady. Herbert's report is dated 14 January 1937, and a large proportion of it is reproduced in Murdie's *Fortean Times* article.

[4] Florence Marryat, *There is No Death*, New York: National Book Company, 1891, pp. 8-11.

[5] It has been generally assumed that Shira and Provand were on a commission for *Country Life*, but the editorial introduction to the *Country Life* spread ('The Ghost of Raynham Hall: An Astonishing Photograph', p. 673) states they were 'photographing Raynham Hall for Lady Townshend, and not under any special circumstances.' Lady Townshend had a still different version, discussed below.

[6] This disposes of the reasonable question why they were recording a fairly unprepossessing part of the house.

[7] Shira, *Country Life*, p. 673.

in the United States on 4 January 1937,[8] the photograph has appeared in a number of books on ghosts in various states of murkiness which obscure the fine detail of the scene. Shira is also credited with a photograph of the Marchioness Townshend and her 19-year old daughter Lady Elizabeth, sitting with their dogs on the steps of the Hall, which appeared on the frontispiece of the same issue.

Herbert's interview with the pair threw up useful technical information but also unhelpful supposition. He identifies the camera as an 'old stand camera' with faulty bellows; the film used was Kodak S.S. Ortho (i.e. orthochromatic), the lens of the R.R. (i.e. Rapid-Rectilinear) type. Provand's exposure was 'about 6 seconds', supplemented by a large Sasha flashbulb. This is fine so far, but Herbert then states that the ghost image was 'shaken in a vertical plane, causing doubling of all horizontal lines (or else is two exposures?)', caused by vibration. Provand did not dispute this assertion, merely saying he had not noticed it, which implies a wish not to engage in debate. Herbert found Shira nervous but considered him sincere, and both Shira and Provand honest.

Following Herbert's assessment that shaking had occurred during the lengthy exposure, Murdie identifies 'anomalies' he says have been hitherto overlooked:

> 'On the left hand side as the viewer sees the picture (i.e. on the Brown Lady's right hand side) hangs a framed picture on the wall. Immediately beneath, seemingly hovering in the air, is a duplicate image of this picture. Equally, when one looks at the length of the banisters, they do not connect, and the angles suggest that the camera has been shaken and the staircase accidentally photographed twice. Several luminous patches are also visible, which suggest a doubling of the image throughout.'[9]

The photograph as normally reproduced is very dark and it is difficult to determine what is happening on either edge of the image. However, even a casual glance at the supposed duplicate painting directly beneath the one on the wall shows that it looks entirely different; the picture frame above is smooth and without protuberances, whereas the object below has raised corners. But a lack of similarity between the painting and its mysterious counterpart is not the only problem with this interpretation. If the lower square shape were a duplicate caused by vertical shaking, everything in the photograph would be repeated (as well as blurred by movement), whereas the edges of the stairs show that there was no vertical movement at all.

Unfortunately the two prints of the ghost photograph originally included in the SPR file have vanished. There are however, four other photographs of the staircase in the file, and one of these easily disposes of the mystery of the duplicate 'painting' and the

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[8] 'Has Raynham Hall a GHOST?', *Life*, 4 January 1937, p. 61. The brief, rather tongue-in-cheek report includes a snap of Lady Townshend, who seems to have decided to provide her backing for the enterprise. In answer to the question in the title, the article continues: 'Most people would say no but not Gwladys Ethel Gwendolen Eugenie, 6th Marchioness Townshend, who offers the photograph on [the] right to prove that her home is better haunted than most old English houses.' Tantalisingly, we are told that Provand, who earlier 'had one of his cameras smashed by an angry Raynham Hall apparition, later took the flashlight shot … before the ghost realised what was up.' There is no further information about the smashed camera, how precisely the damage occurred, and whether it was the one used to photograph the Brown Lady.

[9] Murdie, *Fortean Times*, pp. 51-2

unconnected banisters. The first photograph is of the staircase taken by Provand immediately prior to the one with the 'ghost', and as Herbert pointed out, it is overexposed and too dark to make out the relevant details. However, Nandor Fodor, Research Officer of the International Institute for Psychical Research (IIPR), visited Raynham Hall with his wife and daughter and camera expert Arthur Kingston to investigate the case.[10]

They took a number of photographs around the house and there are three of the staircase. One of these is a small (4x6) print, rather dark, of Fodor standing on the staircase in the position occupied by the ghost; another is a contact print of the empty staircase, again too small to establish the details, but the one which shows beautifully what is happening features Mrs Fodor in the same position, on the thirteenth step (this is the photograph Murdie, following Herbert's report, refers to merely as of 'a living person.')[11] Despite being slightly out of focus it is taken with flash and is nicely exposed, showing a great deal more detail than Provand's effort. It is taken slightly further to the right than Provand's and the wider-angle lens used shows a little more of the staircase and surroundings.

From this photograph it is perfectly clear that the duplicate 'painting' is actually part of the panelling running down the wall. Rather than the staircase being a straight run from top to bottom, there is a short landing between the eleventh and twelfth steps, counting from the top, which has more elaborate decoration at that point. A painting, one of several on the wall going up the stairs, has been hung directly above this landing. On the other side of the staircase, the banisters appear unconnected half way up because for a short length they are running horizontally with the ground. The reason this is not clear in the photographs is because the angle from which they were taken foreshortens the staircase and makes it appear to ascend in an uninterrupted progression.

The luminous patches Murdie identifies are reflections from the risers, banister and panelling caused by the flash Provand used. Elsewhere there is flare caused by the lengthy exposure on the lights (there is a naked lightbulb above the stairs which is cropped from the published photograph but clearly visible in the photograph of Mrs Fodor). The confusing appearance of the left hand side of the staircase is compounded by the shiny panelling, which reflects the stairs and makes it more difficult to see where they end. Murdie says that 'Curiously, in no ghost book published since 1937 does an author – whether sceptic or believer – appear to have commented upon the defects immediately spotted by Herbert.'[12] This would not appear to be because of a lack of observation but because these defects were not actually present.

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[10] Fodor's report ('Research Officer's Report of a Visit to Rainham (sic) Hall Norfolk, on January 8th – 9th, 1937') indicates that Lady Townshend 'rang up' and invited him down to investigate, but in fact he wrote to her on 6 January 1937 asking if he could come. He travelled down in Kingston's two-seater, his wife and daughter arriving by train later. Despite the dates of the visit given in the title, the report, dated 11 January 1937, says he arrived after 5pm on Saturday 9th. As an aside, it is odd that someone who knew Lady Townshend frequently misspells Raynham, but so did Florence Marryat.

[11] Murdie, *Fortean Times*, p. 52.

[12] Murdie, *Fortean Times*, p. 52.

Shira's *Country Life* article was followed by a more general overview of spirit photography by Harry Price.[13] He discusses the Raynham Hall photograph in a single paragraph, dryly commenting:'It must be admitted that had the photographer first taken the stairs and, without moving the camera, introduced a draped figure into the picture (by the double exposure method), an identical "spirit picture" would have been obtained.' However, upon meeting Shira and Provand and examining the negative, he apparently had any suspicions allayed: 'I could not shake their story, and I had no right to disbelieve them', though upon what basis he abrogated his right is not clear.

He goes on to suggest that 'Only collusion between the two men would account for the "ghost" if it is a fake. The negative is entirely innocent of any faking.'[14] However, he is keener to plug his new book *Confessions of a Ghost-Hunter* than subject the photograph to sustained scrutiny. He does not mention shaking as a possible factor, and neither does Fodor anywhere in his reports and correspondence. Price's suggestion that double exposure might have been used is suggestive, but not the method he proposes as it would not have allowed such sharpness in the stairs behind the figure. They have been uniformly exposed, which would not have been the case had a portion been occluded for part of the exposure. There is though another way it could have been done.

Part Two - A possible explanation?

While the SPR file clears up some of the questions posed by the published photograph, it does not help to explain the mysterious shape in the centre. There is a declaration from a chemist, Mr Jones, in the file stating that he saw the negative being fixed, and the figure was present, which might be construed as ruling out anything fraudulent done after the photograph was taken. His statement says that:

> 'I saw the negative of the Oak (sic) staircase at Raynham Hall, in the hypo bath in your dark room immediately after it had been taken by Captain Provand from the developer.
>
> 'I am satisfied that the ethereal figure on the staircase was there when the film was being fixed.' [15]

It is clear Provand developed the negatives taken at Raynham Hall because he insists on this point in a statement in the file, in which he says of the negatives that prior to development nobody else had had access and that 'Even during development I allowed no one else to handle them.' [16] It seems odd a chemist happened to be in the

[13] 'Photographing the Spirits', *Country Life*, pp. 674-5.
[14] This statement by Price is reprinted in an article by Fodor, 'A Letter from England', dated January 1937, in *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. 31, 1937, p. 57. Fodor gives a potted history of the Provand photograph and his weekend visit to Raynham Hall, subtitled 'Unusual Ghost Photograph.'
[15] Statement by B Jones, Manager, Blake, Sandford & Blake dated 18 November 1936. He presumably picked up the word 'ethereal' from Shira, who had used it in the *Country Life* article.
[16] This document is undated but was clearly written at about the same time as Mr Jones's and it would appear on the same typewriter. They were originally produced for *Country Life*, and copies sent to Fodor by Shira on 6 January 1937.

dark room, and his presence could be considered a device to add weight to Shira's account. How he came to be there is described in the original *Country Life* article.[17] Provand and Shira were alone in the dark room, and when they saw the figure begin to appear on the negative in the developer Shira immediately ran downstairs to fetch Benjamin Jones, whose premises were underneath his. By the time they arrived back in the dark room, the negative was out of the developer and was being fixed. Unfortunately Jones's statement is essentially worthless as any manipulation could have been done at an earlier stage. It is entirely possible that what the chemist saw was not the original negative being fixed but a rephotographed version of the faked image, done simply to gain his endorsement. In any case, a point omitted by Shira in the *Country Life* article but contained in Mr Jones's statement, is that Blake, Sandford and Blake were 'Dispensing chemists to Indre Shira Ltd', so he was hardly an independent witness.

The figure was unlikely to be caused by a hole in the camera's bellows letting in light, despite Herbert's feeling that Provand's concern that the bellows were faulty was 'significant.' The position in the middle of the stairs, and the human-like shape, is extremely fortuitous for a random leak; one might expect a less regular shape and loss of detail on the stairs behind. Provand had been taking photographs of the house all day, with presumably no leakage occurring. The photograph of the staircase taken immediately before the ghost one, a print of which is in the SPR file, shows no such problem, a point made by Shira himself.[18]

If the photograph was a fake it is likely Provand and Shira were in it together.[19] According to both Herbert and Fodor, Shira had little photographic knowledge – Herbert: 'Shira is obviously no photographer; Fodor: 'He does not understand photography'[20] – which would have entailed Provand actually carrying out the procedure. Yet Shira said he had seen the ghost on the stairs, making him party to a deception. Fodor's letter to Lady Townshend recounting an interview with Shira and Provand on 12 January 1937 says that Shira had claimed to have seen the figure descend from the third step, which is extremely precise given the surprise Shira must surely have been experiencing at that moment.[21] Herbert's account of his interview with the pair says that Shira was uncertain where the figure was when he first saw it.[22]

Shira was clearly enjoying the situation, unlike his colleague. Provand's possible discomfort when being quizzed by Herbert, his rather terse and defensive claim that

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[17] Shira, *Country Life*, p. 674.
[18] Letter from Shira to Fodor, 4 February 1937.
[19] This is also the conclusion of Roger Clarke in the chapter he devotes to the Brown Lady in *A Natural History of Ghosts: 500 Years of Hunting for Proof*, London: Particular Books, 2012, p.242. Tackling the use of Shira and Provand as pseudonyms, he thinks the key to their true identities lies in their business address at 49 Dover Street, Piccadilly, London W1. In the London directory for 1936 a solicitor, William Marshall, is listed above Blake, Sandford & Blake in Dover Street. Clarke suggests Indre Shira might have been Marshall (his profession giving him credibility in Lady Townshend's eyes) and Provand the chemist downstairs (presumably Jones, meaning he had endorsed his own work). In 2012 I was in touch with Provand's great-granddaughter but she did not tell me his real name. Hopefully it will emerge eventually.
[20] Herbert, report 14 January 1937; Fodor, report of visit to Shira's studio 12 January 1937.
[21] Letter from Fodor to Lady Townshend, 13 January 1937.
[22] Herbert report 14 January 1937. Shira's *Country Life* article is similarly non-committal, saying simply that he saw the form coming slowly down the stairs.

he could not explain the figure ,[23] and his stated worry that the camera was faulty, hint that he was Shira's unwilling partner in the enterprise. As to why they were in the house, they were neither on a commission from *Country* Life nor working for Lady Townshend. Fodor stated:

> 'According to Lady Townshend, Indra (sic) Shira particularly wanted to photograph the ghost ... He wanted to sit up at night. [quoting Lady Townshend:] "I would not have him for that purpose. But I allowed him and Captain Provand to come on a day when I had the whole Archaeological Society of Norfolk staying on the grounds. Indra (sic) Shira's wife described to me exquisite influences all over the house. She behaved as a psychic."'[24]

He was not simply a society photographer who happened upon a ghost while recording a grand house. His prior enthusiasm for the ghostly aspects of the house and his wife's behaviour make his comment in *Country Life* that he was not interested in psychic phenomena somewhat suspect.[25] Ghosts were on Shira's mind.

As to how it might have been done, the answer possibly lies in an old spirit photography technique. The shape of the figure bears a similarity to a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a covered head and cloak falling away towards the bottom over a tunic. One method for producing such a figure within the photograph would have used black velvet. In this scenario, Provand would take the photograph of the staircase, then back in the studio place a statue in front of a black velvet background. A Madonna might have been selected because Provand and Shira knew Lady Townshend held very strong religious beliefs, or because it was easily obtained. With an even light source to reduce modelling, an overexposed photograph would be taken of the statue, leaving little detail but mainly a bright shape. This would produce a negative that was mainly white (thanks to the velvet) with the darker shape on it.

The two negatives would be put together and when printed the staircase would show through the other negative, making it appear that the figure was standing on one of the stairs. The size of the figure could be adjusted by moving the camera in front of the statue until it looked the right size in proportion to the stairs (though in fact in terms of scale it looks rather small), and the negatives could be moved around to ensure the correct positioning. The resulting composite would be rephotographed to create a new negative, the only disadvantage being a slight loss of detail, such as what is going on with the panelling and banisters. Shira could say 'Mr Jones, Captain Provand and I vouch for the fact that the negative has not been retouched in any way' in all sincerity as no retouching would be necessary.[26]

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[23] Provand's undated statement.
[24] Fodor's 'Research Officer's Report', 11 January 1937, p. 2. The presence of Shira's wife has hitherto been generally unremarked, and it is bizarre that Fodor failed to follow this up when interviewing Shira. Madame Shira was a professional palmist and astrologer, well enough known to appear on a cigarette card in the 1938 W.A. & A. C. Churchman 'In Town To-night' series where she is billed as a 'Cheirastrologist'.
[25] Shira, *Country Life*, p. 673.
[26] Shira, *Country Life*, p. 674.

Barry Salt describes this process in a filmmaking context, albeit with a single negative, as used by George Albert Smith (a long-standing member of the SPR and very early filmmaker) in making *The Corsican Brothers* (1898): 'The ghost effect was simply done by draping the set in black velvet after the main action had been shot, and then re-exposing the negative with the actor playing the ghost going through the actions at the appropriate point…'[27] It is unlikely that the staircase and statue were photographed onto the same plate because some work would be necessary to achieve the correct size and positioning, and a mistake would render the negative useless, whereas Provand would be able to play around with two separate negatives in the darkroom, re-photographing the statue if necessary, until he had achieved the correct balance.

Whether the photograph should be called the *Brown Lady* (i.e. Dorothy Walpole) is open to question. Shira in a letter to Fodor said that 'certain experts' think it is the Madonna, which was probably his preferred interpretation, despite hedging his bets by adding 'we have an open mind on the subject'.[28] An editorial comment in *Country Life* specifically states that if it is an apparition it is not regarded as the Brown Lady.[29] The photograph must have held an extra resonance for Lady Townshend because she had a chapel below the staircase (something Shira, having been in the house all day, was likely to know, not least because Fodor notes she was in the habit of burning incense there).[30] According to his report, Lady Townshend, when asked by Fodor who had first suggested that the shape represented the Madonna and not the Brown Lady, replied she had, although it appeared to be a different shape to 'Our Lady of Walsingham' whose shrine is close to Raynham Hall.[31] Either way, she certainly seemed inclined to believe that the figure, whoever it was, was genuine, calling it 'that beautiful apparition.' She felt that Shira would not risk the professional reputation of his business by faking the ghost.[32]

That Lady Townshend was inclined to belief in the paranormal can be gauged by the fact that she had recently collaborated with Maude Ffoulkes on a volume, *True Ghost Stories*.[33] Fodor had provided the introduction, and among Lady Townshend's several contributions, writing as 'Gwladys Townshend of Raynham', was a chapter on 'The Ghosts of Raynham Hall'. Dennis Bardens, in his *Ghosts & Hauntings*, states that the late Lady Townshend had told him 'she herself had seen the Brown Lady several times.'[34] Perhaps Shira had read *True Ghost Stories* and decided to perpetrate a hoax to capitalise on what he assumed was Lady Townshend's gullibility.

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[27] Barry Salt, Film *Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, London: Starword, 2nd edition, 1992, p. 35.
[28] Letter from Shira to Fodor, dated 6 January 1936 [i.e. 1937].
[29] *Country Life*, p. 671
[30] Fodor's Research Officer's Report, 11 January 1937, p. 2.
[31] A side-trip to Walsingham would have offered a variety of statues from which Shira and Provand could choose what best suited their requirements, assuming the hoax was pre-planned.
[32] Letter from Lady Townshend to Fodor, 14 January 1937.
[33]The Marchioness Townsend of Raynham and Maude M. C. Ffoulkes (eds.), *True Ghost Stories*, London: Hutchinson, 1936,
[34] Dennis Bardens, *Ghosts & Hauntings*, London: Senate, 1997, p.151. It was originally published in 1965; Lady Townshend died in 1959. The Brown Lady photograph graces the cover of the Senate edition.

Herbert's view was that the shape was caused by light leaking into the camera, although he mused: 'It is, however, certainly very curious that the image should be approximately the right size for a human figure.'[35] Jocelyn Pierson in the American SPR's *Journal*, rounding up a significant number of instances of psychical research in general-interest US journals, sniffily dismissed the photograph with the verdict that 'This picture, accompanied as it is with such meagre corroborating data, would not be worth mentioning except in connection with this sudden outburst of interest in psychic phenomena.'[36] As for Fodor, he agreed with Lady Townshend that Shira would be unlikely to risk his professional reputation by fraud, and naively pondered: 'There is nothing on the film which would give rise to suspicion', and continued, 'It is an excellent case. To 100% however it can only be proven by a very vigorous character examination.'[37] Having done said examination, he concluded of Shira and Provand, as had Herbert, '... they both look honest people...'.

There should be original prints still extant in the hands of collectors. Shira told Fodor that because of demand he was selling 8x10 prints for a guinea,[38] and there would have been a great deal of interest after the *Country Life* publication. This financial request clearly annoyed Fodor who protested that research organisations ought to have them free as the benefit to the studio was worth more. He added as an inducement that 'We [the IIPR] are willing, after an examination, to back it up.'[39] Shira also had a framed copy of the *Country Life* article and an enlarged image of the ghost photograph outside his premises, causing Fodor to say to Lady Townshend, 'Indre Shira is out to make capital out of your ghost.'[40] Perhaps an owner of an original print would be kind enough to donate it to the SPR archives for further study.

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[35] Letter from Herbert to Edmond P Gibson, 13 April 1937. Light leakage was Murdie's view as well, according to the interview he gave to *Varsity*: his 'in-depth study concludes that the ghost-like apparition in the photo was probably caused by the camera leaking light, rather than by supernatural forces'; he is then quoted directly: 'In my view it is the result of malfunction and misinterpretation, not a deliberate fraud.'

[36] *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. 30, December 1936, p. 374.

[37] Letter from Fodor to Lady Townshend, 13 January 1937.

[38] Letter from Shira to Fodor dated 6 Jan 1936 [ie 1937].

[39] Letter from Fodor to Shira, 7 January 1937. Fodor got his free copies, acknowledging them in a letter to Shira on 28 January 1937.

[40] Letter from Fodor to Lady Townshend, 13 January 1937.